



Representative

Jim Dunn



17th District

1997 Welfare Reform Update

Dear friend,

After 60 years — three generations of a welfare system that promoted dependency upon the government — the 1997 Legislature adopted a historic public assistance plan. The changes adopted by your lawmakers this year will empower people to lift themselves out of despair, dependency and poverty and into self-sufficiency and economic independence. I want to share with you some of these changes in this newsletter because it is such an exciting new way to help people better their own lives.

To give you an idea of how big the welfare population is in this state, consider that for the month of April this year there were more than 94,000 men, women and children receiving cash assistance in Washington state. In the city of Vancouver and Clark County combined, there were more than 8,500 on welfare for that same one-month period. In fact, over \$1 million was paid out for cash assistance in April in our area alone

Clearly, there is a need for public assistance in our area. This year's welfare reform plan represents a significant shift in how best to help those in need. Welfare will no longer be a one-way handout — an entitlement where nothing is required from the recipient. Now, public assistance will be temporary and, from the first time recipients apply, all able adults will be required to work or participate in work activities or community service in exchange for benefits. The plan we approved this session signifies an enormous undertaking and will have a lasting and positive affect on all of Washington's citizens.

Inside this newsletter is a brief description of the major components of the plan which has been signed into law. I urge you to read through this and contact me if you have specific questions or concerns about the new welfare system. I value your input, and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jim Dunn".

Jim Dunn



The Personal Responsibility Act of 1997

The new welfare reform plan, nicknamed the "Personal Responsibility Act of 1997," empowers those in need and frees them from their dependency upon the government by recognizing responsibility, requiring accountability and promoting opportunity.

Last year, federal welfare reform legislation was approved by the Republican Congress and signed by the president. This development was the impetus for reforming welfare in Washington state. Changes at the national level gave states new freedom to design their own welfare programs aimed at helping the needy in their own communities.

The historic changes adopted by the 1997 Legislature will create public assistance that is based on a recipient's needs and will require them to be actively working their way from dependence to self-sufficiency. The following is a brief synopsis of the changes approved this year:

▶ Establishing the Washington WorkFirst program

The federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children entitlement program is eliminated and replaced with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The Washington WorkFirst program is created. This will be the state's new public assistance program, focusing on obtaining paid, unsubsidized employment for all recipients. *Welfare will no longer be an individual entitlement.*

▶ Diversion program

A program is created that will divert people from welfare. Low-income families will be able to receive cash assistance in order to meet short-term needs that would otherwise cause them to go on welfare. Aid would be intended to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, automobile repairs or other employment-related needs.

▶ Assessment of needs

All applicants who do not find employment in the first four weeks will have their employment, educational and other needs assessed. Based on the assessment, an individual responsibility plan will be established which will detail the applicant's strategy for becoming self-sufficient.

▶ Time limits

A person may receive benefits for no more than 60 months (five years) in a lifetime.

▶ Exemptions from the time limit

At the end of the first five years of the program, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) can exempt up to 20 percent of the caseload from the time limit.

▶ Integrated employment child-care program

TANF recipients will be able to work more and keep more of their work-related income: 50 percent of all wages.

▶ Required work activities

From the time they enter the TANF program, all adult recipients will be required to participate in the Washington WorkFirst program. They will first be required to search for a job. If they cannot find a job, then they will participate in subsidized or nonsubsidized work, on-the-job training, vocational education or community service.

▶ Teen parent provisions

All minor parents who receive TANF benefits will be required to live at home or in another adult-supervised setting. Also, teen recipients will have to be actively progressing toward a high school diploma or GED, or enrolled in an approved alternative education program.

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▶ Washington WorkFirst for parents owing support

Services through the WorkFirst program may be provided to noncustodial parents who are unable to meet their support obligation.

▶ Work and business opportunities

Numerous work and business opportunities for recipients are created. For example, recipients will be allowed to establish individual development accounts which will allow them to save money for post-secondary education, housing, or for a business capitalization account. Individuals also will be able to work with private organizations that lend or grant money for business ventures.

▶ Child-care training program

A program is created that will train TANF recipients who wish to become family child-care providers or child-care center teachers. DSHS is required to offer the training in both urban and rural communities.

▶ Legal immigrant provisions

New legal immigrants will be eligible to receive public assistance after a one-year residency. Their sponsor's income will be counted to determine if an immigrant is eligible. Legal immigrants who will no longer receive Supplemental Security Income from the federal government will receive benefits under the General Assistance-Unemployable program. A state-funded food assistance program is created for legal immigrants who have lost their eligibility to receive food stamps. And a program will be established to assist in expediting naturalizing legal immigrants who want to become citizens.

Highlights of Washington's New "WorkFirst" Public Assistance Plan:

Self-sufficiency replaces government dependency.

- ✓ Assistance is limited to 60 months during an adult's lifetime, with exemptions for 20 percent of the caseloads to cover the disabled, extreme hardship cases or victims of domestic violence.
- ✓ Adult recipients are required to detail a strategy for leaving public assistance as a condition of receiving benefits.
- ✓ All able adults are required to work or participate in on-the-job training, vocational education or community service in exchange for benefits.
- ✓ Unmarried parents under the age of 18 must live at home or in another state-approved setting and attend school programs.
- ✓ New legal immigrants are ineligible for assistance for one year, after which the income and resources of an immigrant's sponsor will be considered for the next five years when determining eligibility.

Representative

Jim Dunn

17th District



Committees:

Trade and Economic Development, *vice chair*
Higher Education
Government Administration

Keep in touch!

If you are interested in more information about welfare reform or other issues, please feel free to contact me by letter, phone or e-mail at:

Olympia office:

402 John L. O'Brien Building
PO BOX 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600
(360) 786-7976

In Vancouver:

(360) 896-5761

E-mail:

dunn_ji@leg.wa.gov

TOLL-FREE LEGISLATIVE HOTLINE: 800-562-6000

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Rep. Jim Dunn
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